

THE CRYPTOZOOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF OLD BIRD NAMES IN NATIVE VOCABULARIES

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ABSTRACT: It is now known that the Pacific islands supported many more endemic bird species than exist at present, and that extinction occurred within the past 2,000 years. A comparison of native bird names appearing in a Tahitian-English dictionary published in 1851 with those listed in a modern ornithological work found that, while most of the names in the modern work are included in the 1851 dictionary, there are many names in the 1851 dictionary which are not included in the modern work, and thus do not appear to represent extant Tahitian species. An abstracted list of 55 native bird names from the 1851 dictionary is presented, together with possible identifications. Further collaborative work by linguists, ornithologists, and native naturalists could increase our knowledge of extinct Pacific island birds.

INTRODUCTION

For a long time, it was assumed that no bird species had become extinct on Pacific islands until the discovery and exploitation of those islands by European explorers and colonists, and that, until about the 17th century, all avifaunas were intact and undisturbed. The fact that many 17th, 18th, and 19th century travelogues and faunas, of continental areas as well as islands, contained descriptions of birds that could not be identified with any extant species, was an embarrassment.

This tended to be explained away by the suggestion that the descriptions were erroneous; that they were poor descriptions of something extant (as many have indeed proved to be); that the bird was a hybrid, an artifact, or a freak variety of something else; or that the author was simply a liar. Many descriptions were thus ignored as being irrelevant.

However, evidence has been emerging—much still unpublished (but q.v. Olson and James 1982, Steadman and Kirch 1990)—that many islands of the Pacific Ocean formerly supported many more endemic bird species than at present, that many of those species have become extinct in relatively recent times (i.e., since the Polynesians colonized the area, approximately 2000 years B.P.), and that they almost certainly were exterminated by the native inhabitants. An examination of native bird names and native traditions, therefore, might shed some light on the birds which formerly occurred there.

THE ROLE OF LINGUISTICS

Linguistics and folklore have played important roles in other recent cryptozoological analyses, particularly when examining native vocabularies. Bauer and Russell (1987), for example, have established a linkage between the legendary *kawekaweau*, a reptile of New Zealand Maori folklore, and the giant gecko, *Hoplodactylus delcourti*, a species known from only one specimen of unknown provenance in a French museum. Colarusso (1988), through an in-depth linguistic analysis, has concluded that the supposed *waitoreke* known to the Maoris was (or is) a real animal of mammalian affinities.

Not being a linguist, a proper interpretation of native Tahitian bird names must be left to others. However, I would like to present some linguistic information which I uncovered some years ago when examining a Tahitian-English dictionary published in the mid-19th century (Davies 1851), a publication I discovered by chance in the British Library. The results of my examination were quite astonishing. There were a great many bird names listed, and in comparing them with the local names given in J. C. Thibault's *Birds of Tahiti* (Thibault 1975), it was found that nearly all the names used by the latter author matched those used in the 1851 dictionary, but there were many in the 1851 dictionary which found no counterpart with extant Tahitian species.

Since some birds have alternate names, a certain number of these unidentified names probably represent such alternatives. However, many may actually refer to birds now extinct on the island. An abstracted list appears below. It is arranged alphabetically, and includes identifications based on Thibault (1975).

LIST OF NATIVE TAHITIAN BIRD NAMES

- *Aeto*. An eagle. This name may be of fairly recent introduction, *aetos* being the Greek word for an eagle. Unidentified.
- *Ao*. A large spotted sea bird (apparently this word has a great many other meanings). = *Sula leucogaster*, the Brown Booby.
- *Arevareva* (also called *oovea*). A large spotted bird; said formerly to be inspired at times by the god Manuteaa. = *Eudynamis taitensis*, the Long-tailed Cuckoo.
- *Ataetai*. A white bird, presumably one which runs, swims, or flies speedily, as the word also means nimbleness. Unidentified.
- *Huapareva*. An egg of the bird *pareva* (unidentified), often found on floating rubbish on the sea. Figurative: a person of mean origin or parentage.
- *Huioa*. Name of a bird; also a company prettily attired. Presumably this was a gregarious bird of brightly-colored plumage. Unidentified.
- *Io* or *oio*. The name of a sea bird, from its cry *oio*. Also called *oa*, which

means "to paint black," and the name of the black god of night. = *Anous stolidus*, the Brown Noddy.

- *Itae*. A pigeon. Unidentified.
- *Itatae*. Name of a bird. = *Gygis alba*, the White or Fairy Tern.
- *Mauroa*. A tropicbird. = *Phaethon lepturus*, the White-tailed Tropicbird.
- *Meha*. The name of a small bird. = ?*Nesophylax niger*, Miller's Rail (Walters 1988). The name *maho* given in the original description may be a corruption of *meja*.
- *Meho*. The name of a bird. = *Porzana tabuensis*, the Spotless Crake.
- *Moa*. A fowl. = *Gallus gallus*, the Red Junglefowl. There are a number of other related words:
 - Moafaatito*, a fighting cock.
 - Moahururau*, a fowl of many qualities. Figurative: an unsteady or fickle person.
 - Moa opapa*, a fowl without a tail.
 - Moafiri*, a plant; also a wild fowl.
 - Moapateatoto*, a courageous cock.
 - Moapuruhi*, a cowardly cock.
 - Moataratua*, a cock with a long spur.
 - Moaraupia*, a peculiarly-colored fowl.
- *Moora* or *moore*. A wild duck. = *Anas superciliosa*, the Grey Duck.
- *Moora papaa*. A foreign duck. Unidentified. *Papaa* means a foreigner or white man, so *moora papaa* could refer to *Anas platyrhynchos*, the Mallard, or other ducks which are kept as captives on Tahiti.
- *Moora ao*. A goose. Unidentified.
- *Omamao*. A singing bird "about the size of a sparrow." = *Pomarea nigra*, the Tahiti Flycatcher.
- *Omaomao*. A chattering bird. Its cry is called *oviriviri*. Unidentified.
- *Omaomaopuafau*. Related to the bird *omaomao* that has yellow feathers. Unidentified, but possibly some species of honeyeater (Meliphagidae).
- *Ooea*. Name of a bird. Unidentified.
- *Opea*. Name of a small black bird. Unidentified. This name appears to be used for both *Hirundo tahitica*, the Pacific Swallow, and *Collocalia leucophaea*, the Polynesian Swiftlet.
- *Otaha*. The man-of-war bird. = *Fregata* sp., a frigatebird (two species occur at Tahiti).
- *Otatara*. Name of a bird "resembling the woodpecker." Unidentified. This word appears to be used for both *Halcyon venerata*, the Venerated Kingfisher, and *Acrocephalus caffra*, the Tahiti Reed-Warbler. The cry of the bird *tatare* was *oti* when uttered over a person (when it was supposedly ominous of death). No woodpecker is known ever to have occurred on any of the Pacific Islands.
- *Otuu*. A kind of heron. = *Egretta sacra*, the Eastern Reef Heron.

- *Paetaeta*. Name of a bird. Unidentified.
- *Peheo*. Name of a bird. Unidentified.
- *Perue*. Name of a bird. Unidentified.
- *Petea*. A long-tailed parakeet. Unidentified. This word is apparently now used for *Phaethon lepturus*, the White-tailed Tropicbird, so the original identification could be an error. However, since there is already another name for this species, it is more likely that the name *petea* was transferred to it after the extinction of the parakeet to which the name originally referred (q.v. the case of the name *vini*).
- *Punae*. Name of a bird. Unidentified.
- *Punaneuneu*. Name of a webbed-footed bird. Unidentified.
- *Putii*. Name of a bird. Unidentified.
- *Putoa*. Name of a bird (also of a shell). Unidentified.
- *Putu* (also *oputu*). Name of a bird. Unidentified.
- *Reiamauoa*. Name of a bird with long legs. Figurative: someone who is very fleet of foot; hence: *avaereia*, speedy, with long strides. Unidentified.
- *Rupe*. Name of a large pigeon. = *Ducula aurorae*, the Tahiti Pigeon.
- *Ruro*. Name of a bird formerly sacred to the gods; hence: *hopuhopu-aruro*, "to dip and out again, like the action of the bird *ruro*." Unidentified. It sounds like a probing wader.
- *Ruru*. The name of a large aquatic bird, probably an albatross. Not certainly identified.
- *Ruru*. Another name for *otatare*. = *Halcyon venerata*, the Venerated Kingfisher. Thibault (1975) assigned both names *ruru* and *otatare* to the Venerated Kingfisher, but David Steadman (personal communication) has pointed out that the Respected Kingfisher, *Halcyon tuta*, although now only a rare visitor to Tahiti, occurred there in historical times.
- *Taeifeiaitu*. A bird sacred to the god Tane, one of the principal Tahitian deities. Unidentified.
- *Tapureahuruhuru*. The name of a bird with black and white spots or streaks. Unidentified.
- *Tarahuaru*. Name of a sea bird. Figurative: a talkative, noisy person. Unidentified.
- *Tarara*. Name of a bird. Unidentified.
- *Torea*. Name of a bird. = *Pluvialis dominica*, the Pacific Golden Plover.
- *Toroa*. Name of a sea bird. Unidentified. In the Cook Islands, this name is used for *Sula sula*, the Red-footed Booby (David Steadman, personal communication).
- *Tufaru*. Name of a bird. Unidentified.
- *Uao* or *uaao*. Name of a bird. = *Sula sula*, the Red-footed Booby.
- *Uenia*. Name of a bird. Unidentified.
- *Upaupa*. Name of a mountain bird. Unidentified.
- *Uramarea*. Yellow feathers used "for the gods" (this term is unexplained,

but presumably it refers to some religious ceremony) in the absence of red ones (see *vanevane*). Unidentified.

- *Uriti*. Name of a bird; probably the same as *uriri*, which = *Heteroscelus incanus*, the Wandering Tattler.
- *Uupa*. A kind of pigeon. = *Ptilinopus purpuratus*, Grey-green Fruit-Dove.
- *Vanevane*. Red feathers fastened to pieces of sinnet and "used for the gods" (see *uramarea*). Unidentified.
- *Vini*. Name of a small parakeet. *Vini peruviana*, the Blue Lory, to which the name referred, is now extinct on Tahiti, and the name has been used to refer to *Zosterops lateralis*, the Grey-backed White-eye; *Ramphocelus dimidiatus*, the Crimson-backed Tanager; *Neochmia temporalis*, the Red-browed Firetail; *Estrilda astrild*, the Common Waxbill; and *Lonchura castaneothorax*, the Chestnut-breasted Mannikin, all of which have been introduced since 1851. Clearly, it has become a general term for a small passerine.
- *Vinipaura*. A species of *Vini*, of which there are several varieties distinguished by color:
 - *Vinipauri* (paure = black or dark).
 - *Vinitea* (tea = white).
 - *Vinitete* (tete = ?).
 - *Vinirehu*. (rehu = ashes? = grey).
 - *Vinipapaa*. Apparently means foreign.

Some of these may refer to plumages of *Vini peruviana*, the Blue Lory, or to the extinct species *Vini vidivici* and *Vini sinotoi*, both of which are recorded archaeologically from Huahine.

- *Vinitunupaa*. Roasted *vini*(!), but also signifying something rare and delicious. This suggests that the Blue Lory was eaten by the Tahitians, and this may have been the cause of its extinction.

That Tahitian bird names were probably not static, and that there may have been even more of them than here outlined is suggested by several names used by Thibault (1975) which do not appear in the 1851 dictionary:

- *Noha*. = *Pterodroma rostrata*, the Tahiti Petrel.
- *Hao*. = *Butorides striatus*, the Mangrove Heron.
- *Manu'amu moa*. = *Circus aeruginosus approximans*, the Swamp Harrier. This subspecies was introduced to the island in 1885.
- *Teu'e* or *kivi*. = *Numenius tahitiensis*, the Bristle-thighed Curlew.
- *Tarapapa*. = *Sterna bergii*, the Swift Tern.

DISCUSSION

Fieldwork by Storrs Olson and David Steadman has revealed bird bones on many Pacific islands which refer to species now totally extinct. On some islands, the avifauna appears to have been positively devastated, presumably by the native inhabitants. While the work of uncovering bones continues, much valuable information might be uncovered by the study of bird names

in native island languages. These studies would benefit from the corroborative efforts of linguists, ornithologists, and native naturalists.

Native words, like fossils, often survive to modern times, and may be used by investigators to further our understanding of past faunas. That is why linguistic research is important in many areas of natural history, including cryptozoology. Coupled with paleontological and archaeological discoveries, linguistic research can help researchers learn more about species that have vanished, and also about those that may persist cryptically to the present.

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(Editor's Note: Normally, the English vernacular [common] names of species appear uncanceled [lower case] in zoological journals. However, by convention, ornithologists, who designate very specific vernacular names to all bird species, use capitalization in their published works. This results in style inconsistencies in non-ornithological journals, particularly when the vernacular names of bird species and other vertebrate species appear in the same paper, with bird names capitalized but the others not. After consulting with several zoologists, including ornithologists, the following rule has been adopted for Cryptozoology by the Editor: if a paper deals exclusively or almost exclusively with birds, all vernacular species names will be capitalized, following ornithological convention; if a paper deals mainly with other vertebrate forms [fish, amphibians, reptiles, or mammals], or even with invertebrates—in which birds are mentioned only in passing—all vernacular species names, including those of birds, will not be capitalized—Editor.)